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Author(s): Peyman Matin

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Apotropaic Plants in the Persian Folk Culture

Peyman Matin
Yerevan State University

Abstract

In the Persian culture, the acrid, pungent, and at times irritating smell of some plants have given rise to some beliefs so far as a magical and supernatural power has been attributed to them. Harmal, garlic, onion, and asafoetida are the most important herbs that are supposed to have apotropaic power to ward off vicious creatures, exorcise the evil eye, and annul magic. The paper presents a detailed description of the Iranian folk rituals and ceremonies where the above plants feature as magical elements and evil repellents *par excellence*. A short review of the role of these herbs in the traditional medicine is given as well.

Keywords

Ritual Plants, Persian Folk Beliefs, Ethnobotany, Harmal, Garlic, Onion, Asafoetida, Exorcism, Demons, Evil Eye

General

Harmal, garlic, onion, and asafoetida are of paramount importance in the folk rituals of various regions of Iran. Strangely enough, in some rituals two or three plants are simultaneously mentioned. Almost in all cases, some major characteristics constitute the motive why these are used in the folk procedures. Most of all, they are deeply-rooted in the Persian land—both cultivated and wild. Harmal, garlic, onion, and asafoetida have protractedly been used in flavouring and seasoning the Persian foods, for which some properties have been expressed: easy digestion of the foods, stimulation of some body-related phlegm, such as sexual potency, etc. Moreover, what these herbs have in common is a property to cleanse, purify, and eliminate the animal poisons.

However, what has given these four plants a unique stance in the Persian folklore and culture is the belief of Iranians in their magical potential to ward off wicked creatures, like jinns, āls, and fairies. Formed as a result of a firm credence to the plants' powerful impacts, this belief has laid grounds for many ritual practices aimed at driving away such evil powers. To singe harmal beans, to burn the skin of onion and garlic,

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and to consume asafoetida gum—all have their roots in the belief in magical power of the herbs as a repercussion of their pungent smell.

Interestingly enough, the influential power of these herbs in exorcism ceremonies is poles apart from their functions in the festive events, as Nowruz, wedding party, and in the traditional cuisonary. This bifacial representation may be interpreted as a twofold sense of admiration and resentment of a sacred element, which can innately stand anywhere on the positive/negative spectrum.

Harmal (Peganum harmala), Pers. *sipand*, is a wild, evergreen plant of Asian, Iranian, and Mediterranean Rutaceae family (Joret 1897: II/166; Mozaffarian 2007: 397; Golgolāb 1947: 214-15). According to botanists, Ruta graveolens is generally different from harmal. David S. Flattery holds that harmal and Ruta graveolens are, in the Middle East, known to be interchangeably the same, since in the Zoroastrian ceremonies the latter has always been a replacement for the former. He suggests that Ruta graveolens has been referred to as the sacred and mythic *homa* (*soma*), which is identical with harmal (Flattery/Schwarts 1989: 85-88). Pers. *sipand* is traced to OIran. **spanta-* (Henning 1977: 607; Flattery/Schwarts 1989: 141-145). Having a volatile oil, harmal is of a tang smell and a virulent smack.

Garlic (Allium sativum) is one of the Liliaceaes with a severe scent because of sulfur in its glands. It has an old history as a cultivated plant from 5000 years ago with Centeral Asian origin, presumabely. However, there are some signs about cultivation of garlic in ancient Egypt (Herodotus 2000: II/155), but scholars believe this plant has been an indigenous herb in Kyrgyz steppes, Iran, and south-west Siberia as a wild plant (Candolle 1885: 63-65; Mozaffarian 2007: 27; Zāhedī 1994: 16-17). The common term for garlic in Iranian idioms, including Persian, is *sīr* (Pahl. *sīγr*) (on the origin, see Bartholomae 1904: 786; Junker 1912: 81; Asatrian. s.v.).

Onion (Allium cepa) is a gardened plant deriving from the Liliaceae family with glandular and edible roots. Chemical substances of onion have given it a peppery taste and acrid smell. Therefore, onion is ranked top in the reek-plants list (Zargarī 1990: IV/624; Pūrdavūd 1952: 90; Qahremān/Oxovvat 2004: 80). Several types of onions are presently cultivated in different regions of Iran. According to the archaeologists, botanists, and historians, edible onion is likely originated from the steppes of Central Asia, particularly Iran (Cleene/Lejeune 2003: II/424). However, onion's trouble-free process of germination in water, air, and soil, together with its hydrous and nutritious nature, have contributed to it being considered by different civilisations as a key constituent of

nutritional system. There are allusions to onion and the onion-like herbs in the ancient Iranian (Bahār 2006: 87-88), Mediterranean, and Greek written resources (for instance, see Theophrastus 1916: II/65-67; Herodotus 2000: II/155), as well as in the Qur'an (2: 61), and Hebrew Scriptures (Numbers, 6: 11). Onion is termed in Pers. as *piyāz* and *sōx* (the latter, only in classical dictionaries) (for the etymology of these terms, see Bailey 1979: 250; Asatrian, s.vv.).

Asafoetida (Ferula assa-foetida) is another wild, native plant of Iran and such regions as Anatolia, Asia Minor, Armenia, and Afghanistan. Deriving from the Umbellifera family, it is outspread in the Iranian deserts and mountains. Some types of asafoetida are exclusive to Iran: Lorestanian *kamā*, Bīnālūdian *bīrzad*, and Jandaqian *anγūza* (Mozaffarian 2007: 228; Solṭānī 2005: III/155). Laufer (1919: 354-355) proposes that it is essentially an Iranian plant native to Khorasan, southern Kerman, Fars, Na'in, and Lar (see also Bahrāmi 1937: 222-23; Solṭānī, ibid.). In Persian, asafoetida is referred to under various names: *angudān*, *kamā*, *rāf*, *aštarγāz*, *bārzad*, *bīrzad*, *bīrzā*, *angužad*, *anγūza*, *bārīǰa*, *uša*, *kā(k)šīr*, and *saγbīnah* (Abrīšamī 2009: 33). Asafoetida's gum is stringent and bitter, with its garlic-like smell being unbearably rancid.

Popular Beliefs in Magic Power of the Plants

As Iranians believe, harmal is of supernatural power and can, as of the unpleasant smell coming out of its burnt beans, both stave off evil beings and cleanse the weather and environment. According to a Shi'ite hadith, the Prophet once said that harmal is the abode of the heavenly beings (see Qomī 2011: 317). Moreover, Persian written and oral literature possess recurrent references to harmal fumigation for the pupose of drawing back demons and finding a key to problems (see Neẓāmī 1987: 296; Nāsir Xusraw 1960: 143; Hedāyat 1933: 44, Šahrī 1992: III/179).

Fumigation of harmal and asafoetida has since long ago been prevalent to treat those children who were stricken by *ummu-ṣibyān*, the child-abuser *āl* (Bīrūnī 1979: 72). Oddly enough, children were banned to eat garlic and onion simultaneously, when being at treatment by harmal and asafoetida (Axavaynī-Buxārī 1965: 252). Additionally, in some regions of Iran a lantern with harmal seeds burning therein (called *ganda-kū*) is hung from the ceiling so as to prevent *ghouls* from entering the house.

Aligned with harmal, garlic is also of magical and supernatural power in the public opinion. It is used as an apotropaic to ward off jealous āls and imps from approaching the virgin girls and pregnant women. Among the advantages recounted for garlic is its protecting power against eye-smiting; it eliminates pests and parasites, and in-

creases sexual stamina. The belief in garlic's apotropaic power demonstrated through both having it hung from the entrance doors and putting it under the infants' pillows as amulet is a wide-spread element in many cultures, not only in Iranian (see Simoons 1998: 45,48). However, unlike India, where garlic has been regarded as an unrefined element, in Iran this plant has its esteemed place in the most creditable rituals (cf., e.g., the "Haft-Sīn" table with garlic, as well as harmal, as an integral part).

According to Bīrūnī, the people of Ţabaristān, in their rain-soliciting ceremony, used to invoke to garlic, believing that a heavy shower of rain shall unquestionably start falling if garlic is mashed in the Ţabaristān Mountains (Bīrūnī 1993: 245-46). In his *History of Ţabaristān*, Ibn-Isfandyār names a mountain called Būndād-Hurmazd over which there was a well. Garlic was ground down in the well by the local people of Ţabaristān to bring about raining. However, he indicates that the participants in that ceremony would have lost their lives soon (Ibn-Isfandyār 2010: 88).

The Zoroastrians of Iran believe that garlic is a symbol of environmental cleaning, disinfection, bodily health, and eye-smiting protection, whose present at the table is a must. They suppose that the smell of garlic can drive off evils; they consume garlic with bread in their *porseh* ceremony. A Zoroastrian may never leave off garlic skin anywhere, as he/she is strongly convinced of its satanic power being more atrocious than any other magical charm. Therefore, they soak garlic in water before they begin to peel it. In case garlic skin, together with onion, harmal, and Heracleum persicum, is singed in the home, especially on Thursday mornings, as the Zoroastrians believe, a purifying odour shall electrify the household (Ramezānxānī 2008: 117).

Onion also has a prominent role in the life of the Iranians. This is observed in diverse dimensions ranging from onion being strung along the doors of homes and shops (Rasūlī 1999: 352; Pāyande 1987: 208) and heads of grooms (Šahāb-e Kūmle'ī 2007: 72) to a high-flying presence in oral and written literature. Most of all, onion is regarded to be possessing an extraordinary smell to keep away vicious and destructive creatures. Onion holds a foremost place both in the Persian ceremonies and rituals and in the traditional cuisine. In the Persian prose and poetry, onion is met with various similes and metaphors (see Gerāmī 2007: 83).

There is a wide variety of beliefs on the onion's protecting capability against ferocious powers, black magic, diseases, etc. in ancient cultures, such as Iran and Greece (for instance, see Šāmlū 2008, s.v.: *Piyāz*; Cleene/Lejeune 2003: 429-31). That is why, magical conducts and

strange, mythic versions of historical accounts are introduced by onion. There is, moreover, a multitude of reports on prognosticative power of onion in agricultural and bodily health affairs.

A twofold role is occasionally assigned to the onion. In Zoroastrian beliefs, onion is in any case a positive object (Rāzī 2002: II/957); while, in the Islamic dogmatic thought, it is a detestable element whose smell coming from the mouth irritates the angels, especially at Ghadr night (for more details, see Šāmlū 2008, ibid.). This latter, negative view toward onion is held slightly different in popular beliefs. The people of Fasā, for instance, maintain that chopped onion may bring about brawl in the family (Rezāyī 2008: 459); or, when an onion buds, destruction is a typical repercussion (Hedāyat 1933: 88). Basically, the skin of a garlic and/or onion being burnt is an indication of poverty and misfortune (Jāhīd 1977: 96; see also Šīrāzī 2007: 101). The people in Gilan believe that singeing the skin of fruit and vegetables, especially garlic and onion, causes a divine anger and an imminent flood (Qadīrī 2003: 4).

Asafoetida is also believed to possess magical power to flinch the filthy and, contradictorily enough, to instigate the passion. There is a wide array of medical and comestible benefits recounted for asafoetida: appetisingness, provocation of perspiration, stopping of the bleeding, and functioning as a snake-venom antitoxin (Dioscorides 2000: III/383, 432). Asafoetida 's power of provocation, e.g., palpitation and perspiration, has placed it among stimulating herbs in the Persian folk culture, which has paved the way for it to play a leading role in the Iranian cuisine, as confirmed by Chardin (1811: IV/57-58) and Polak (1865: II/282-283).

Against the Charm and the Evil Eye

Methods to take advantage of harmal in order to heal the diseases, protect against the eye-smiting, etc. have always been accompanied by certain magical practices and incantations. "Harmal-revolving" is one of the most commonplace practices in which a handful of harmal is revolved around the head of a person or animal and then the harmal seeds are casted in a grate, the smoke of which fills the ambiance. A piece of the alleged eye-smiter's shirt is sometimes revolved about the head of the eye-smitten and then added to harmal in the flaming grate. In Gilan villages, a handful of the soil on which the eye-smiter has trodden is also singed alongside with the harmal. In Lorestan, the bristles of a broom are cut in the name of eye-smiters, which are then added to harmal in the grate to be singed on Monday or Wednesday evenings (Asadyān-Xorramābādī 1965: 177).

During "harmal-revolving" ceremony, mysterious incantations are symphoniously sung, in which the word *harmal* and the number of its seeds (33 or 130) are vocalised, only to be added with such prayers as "May God blast the eye-smiter!" (Šahrī 1992: III/179). In such prayers, all the names of the close relatives and friends of the potential eye-smiter are numbered (Massè 1938: 57; Šarīʿatzāde 1992: II/260). "Harmal-revolving" ceremony is carried out almost for all those who returned home from travel and newly married brides and grooms.

"Harmal-tattooing" is another ceremony that is performed by using harmal. In this ceremony, some burnt harmal seeds are drawn over the forehead, cheek, chin, glabella, parotid, and, at times, body of the eye-smitten. These were portrayed in both eye-shaped sketches, referred to as *češmārox, panām, češmpanām*, and "«ᔑ»-shaped" ones, referred to as *lām or lāmče* (see Xalaf-e Tabrīzī 1977, s.v. *sipand*). A good example of tattooing is seen in some regions of Khorasan, especially where some intricate, magical procedures are taken to bring back the child who is replaced (changelling) by jinns. In doing so, a mixture of the soil over which the jinns are believed to have passed and harmal is singed, to which some water is then added, and the residue is applied to the child's forehead, shoulder, and neck (for more details, see Šakūrzāde 1984: 203).

Esfandī is a spell made by harmal seeds, which are strung along a thread only to be fastened together later and fabricated in squared, triangular, lozenged, and circular shapes. The resulting structures are afterwards painted (Zokāʿī 1968: 31-32; Farhādī 1993: 322) and hung in living-rooms, sheepfolds, and fields in order to ward off pestilence and bring blessing.

There is a direct relationship between onion and imaginary creatures: onion skin is highly esteemed among the jinns, and in case they, as a response to a man's affection, give onion skin as a sign of reciprocity to him, it would be changed afterwards to gold or silver coins (Safīnežād 1976: 392). People of Garrūs and Bījār build a doll made of cloth and cotton named *valīkān* at Čahāršanbe-sūrī nights. They, meanwhile, singe onion, harmal, alum, and frankincense. The family members then, one by one, come forth and take a bite of the onion, spitting it out at the doll's face. Afterwards, some melodies are sung and some practices are done; then the doll and burnt onion, alum, and frankincense are brushed off the house. On his way home, the one who has carried away the trashes shall not turn his face back lest he would encounter the jinns (Hāšemnyā/Molūkmohammadī 2001: 212-213).

The people of Sarvestān split in half an onion and put 41 beans of black pepper therein. They, then, take out the heart of a sheep and cut the cone-shaped part of it, putting it in the onion. Using three soft twigs of a pomegranate tree, they fasten tightly the onion and demand an amulet-writer to recite *al-Fātiḥa* and *al-Ikhlās* for 41 times. Adding a paste made of wheat, barley, and corn, they finally hole the whole thing up (Homāyūnī 1992: 360-61).

The Zoroastrians of Yazd province use harmal either fresh or dried. They mingle chopped coriander, turmeric, pulverised harmal, and garlic in a mortar, adding cumin, pepper, and salt thereto. The outcome is finally poured down into a silver-plated ritually pure bowl, dressed by mint or oregano slices, only to be carried to the ritual venue.

Garlic and harmal, in addition, have been used in the ceremony of rinsing the dead and their burial. After enshrouding ceremony, a mixture of garlic and harmal was put in the nose, ears, and mouth of the dead body so as to avoid putrefaction (*Vendīdād 2007:* I/485). On the third day of burial, a ceremony was held, in which garlic and harmal were key constituents (Unvala 1922: I/159). Even today, Zoroastrians hold a ritual and set garlic and harmal on the table.

Until recently, Kerman has been the setting for a Zoroastrian ceremony called *Xarafstar*, according to Ibrahim Pūrdavūd. In this ceremony, people from priestly families wore white garments, hitting the road to hunt malevolent creatures (*xarafstar-hā*) with an iron-made, sharp-pointed cudgel (referred to as *māryan*) in an early day of summer. A sort of vegetable oil made of a mixture of castor oil, tragacanth, garlic, vinegar, and harmal was also used in rituals of the Iranian Zoroastrians (Pūrdāvūd 1952: 195).

Apotropaic Ceremonies

In Abadan, the syncopal jinn-possessed person (*delātape*) is kept standing, with his/her legs wide apart, to permit harmal smoke to travel through the whole body. This operation is carried out three times a day. The person is, then, taken to the village Mulla who orders the amulet to be either written on a scrap of paper and be eaten by the person or dipped into the water, which then be drunk by him/her.

Since long ago, the two honoured, though unsavory, elements of garlic and harmal were, in Gāhanbār celebrations, utilised in order to both earn blessing and repulse depravity. In the Pahlavi text of *Rivāyat-ī Dārāb Hormazdyār*, there is a narration on why and when Gāhanbār celebrations were held. According to it, once upon a day, a demon went to Jamshid and claimed that he, after devouring a huge amount of food, is not full yet. Jamshid asked Ohrmazd to find a key to the matter. The lat-

ter demanded a cow to be butchered and its meat be cooked in old vinegar, to be added then with garlic and harmal. Having cited the name of God, the servants presented the food to demon who, immediately after the first morsel, took to his heels. This happened to become a ceremony in Gāhanbār celebrations to cook a butchered cow's meat in vinegar, garlic, and harmal in order to close droughts and famines (for more details, see Unvala 1922: II/162-63).

Sīrsūr festival in the Sasanian times, was held in late-December (4th Day), during which garlic and wine were consumed. People used to cook vegetables with meat to drive off iniquitous complications and heal the afflictions (Christensen 1944: 175). Bīrūnī (1993: 278) comes with close description of this ceremony and its historical background.

Parturition presents the most significant aspect of onion-related ritual ceremonies, which are still widely prevalent in some parts of Iran. Onion is believed to protect the pregnant against approaching demons. With some slight varieties, the way how these ceremonies were held in different regions of Iran has been, by and large, identical. Noteworthy is the onion being present alongside a metal mass (e.g., metal skewer or nail) and hung overhead a pregnant or situated under her pillow. Onion is, in fact, closely related to water (e.g., bathroom or running river). These are all in special connection with āl, an imaginary creature that incessantly threats the pregnant women and their newborn babies (for the details, see Asatrian 2001).

To protect a pregnant woman, it was customary to put scissors/knife beneath her bed and a Holy Qur'an overhead, with four skewers each of seven onions being left in four corners of the room. A thread, to which *Āyat al-kursī* was cited, was extended around the bed, while some pegs nailed downside the bed. The woman was not to be left alone. The number of onions on each skewer could occasionally be reduced to five or three. After ten days of her delivery, the woman was sent to bathroom (Xānsārī 1964: 16). The onions should have been smashed under her feet and thrown off over the running water. A forty-key cup was then used to pour down water all over the woman's head and body (Hedāyat 1933: 28). However, these could occur with some minor differences, like putting sword and dagger over the pregnant's bed, etc. (Katīrāyī 1967: 50).

Every now and then, however, some complexities could be attached to the practices. In the "ceremony of enclosure", midwife, after cutting the funiculus, depicts lines around the woman's bed with the knife previously used for cutting. "What are you doing?", one of the crew women asks. "I am enclosing", the midwife replies. "For whom are you enclosing?", she repeats. "For, say, Mary and her child", the midwife answers.

"Go on! Congratulations!", woman cries. Afterwards, some onions are cubed by the same knife used for cutting and put upside the pregnant's head to drive away āls. The pregnant woman was obliged to stay in the room; in case a departure was compulsory, she was to hold in hand the knife laid under her pillow to stop āls from attacking her (for more details, see Šakūrzade 1984: 138-48).

All these ceremonies were performed in different regions of Iran in nearly similar manners. In Mamsani, to bring an example, a black rope made of goat's skin is reached out around the room, with goat's heart and kidney being swung from the entry door. Moreover, a knife, salt, onion, and shoe are placed in the corner of the room, and mother's and infant's foreheads are marked by a black sign (Mīrnyā 1990: 241-42). In Chaharmahal, apart from skewered onions, harmal is fumigated over the pregnant's head (Nīkzād 1978: 152). The people in Qazvin put over the head of the pregnant woman a knife, which has beforehand been penetrated into an onion. They, in addition, place a black cauldron upside down above her head (Varǰāvand 2007: 929). In Ardebil, *kebab* skewers and onions are placed beneath the cushion of the pregnant or above the door of her room (Bābāṣafarī 1974: II/148). According to Mahmud Pāyande, Gilanis, while accompanying the pregnant to the bathroom, crush a painted-on onion to the ground and give her harmal to spill down gradually on the floor (Pāyande 1987: 30; for other similar customs throughout Iran, see Šarī'atzāde 1992: 254; Lahsa'īzāde/Salāmī 1991: 108; Naǰafī-Āštyānī 2006: 93).

Asafoetida's particular function as an apotropaic element is seen in the Zār ceremony held in southern regions of Iran, where it is used, together with a dog's excrement, to fend off vicious creatures. In order to expel an evil spirit from the body, the afflicted person is laid down, and a bunch of materials, including asafoetida, a goat's hair, a dog's excrement, etc. are fumigated below his/her nose. Following this procedure, in addition to some other dramatic practices played by the person and the healer (*bābā sālem*), the evil spirit is said to be banished out of the body (Sā'edī 1967: 92,122,146).

Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine regards harmal as being of choleric temperament (hot and dry). Various medical properties of the harmal—purifying, healing, and increasing the sexual potency, whether individually or in combination with other herbs—are emphasised both by Greek physicians, such as Dioscorides (2000: III/423-424), and Persian mediaeval authors, like Rhazes (2005: VI/21) and Avecinna (1987: I/645,657).

The same viewpoint has been existing about garlic since long ago (see, e.g., Dioscorides 2000: II/183، III/424، IV/703). Galen suggests that garlic is a treatment to all sorts of illnesses (Paulus Aegineta 1844: 99). Pliny the Elder allocates a separate chapter of his book, *The Natural History*, to garlic-related recommendations, calling it "Sixty-One Medical Prescriptions of Garlic" (XIX/23). Among the wide-ranging scope of benefits counted for garlic are: the keeping away snakes and scorpions, recovering snakebite, healing sores and scorches, having anti-parasite qualities, and treating asthma, jaundice, cough, cancer, etc. (see Rhazes 2005: XX/134-37; Axavaynī-Buxārī 1965: 193,255,281; Hiravī 1967: 85; Avecinna 1987: II/330; Jurǰānī 1993: 600). Generally, Persian traditional medicine considers garlic as hot and dry by nature, ranking it in third to fourth grade.

Asafoetida is also of choleric temperament (hot and dry), being ranked in third grade (Hiravī 1967: 115). The more asafoetida is stinky, the more it appears to be influencing and powerful (Aveccina 1987: I/316; Jurjānī 1993: III/78).

Onion, however, is of various temperaments in the traditional medicine (Ansārī 1876: 67; Aqīlī-Xorāsānī 1992: 222). Therapeutic benefits attributed to onion in Iranian folk medicine are numerous: it opens the vessels, arouses passionate forces, prevents cholera, jaundice, and plague, increases passing of urine and menstruation, loosens dispositions, empties the lungs of mucus, keeps away the gases coming out of rabid dogs, and heals rash and vitiligo (Tonekābonī 2004: 88).

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